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ABSTRACT

This paper examines research on school performance of ethnic minorities in the United States and the Pacific islands in an effort to develop new approaches to the education of Pacific island children. The examination reveals that children who come from American homes that are outside of the mainstream often experience difficulty in Western-style classrooms that are organized according to culturally different assumptions about the use of time, space, language, and instructional strategies. In general, the research shows that orientation to peers, group performance, and meaningful topics plays a greater role in the learning of island students than in the learning of students from American mainstream families. To help improve the education of island children, classrooms may have to be reorganized to allow students to work with their peers in heterogeneous groups for both instruction and independent work. Pacing and timing, and the amount of teacher control, may also need to be adjusted to match the performance of students. Parents and teachers need to discuss their expectations and collaboratively develop school environments and curriculum that will benefit Pacific island children. (Contains 19 references.) (MDM)

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Young Children and Education in the Pacific: A Look at the Research

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Early Learning in the Pacific Region

The Pacific region is home to many culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Traditional cultures are evolving as the islands become increasingly involved in the world marketplace. Traditional and evolving cultures provide the context of life for the families and children on our islands. For centuries, the growth and development of island children has been the responsibility of the home and community. The extended family and the community still provide early learning experiences and function as the first teachers for our children. Formal, Western-style, institutionalized educational systems are now challenged to build on the strengths of these efforts. As we work with young children in the more formal educational settings of day-care centers, preschools, kindergartens, and early elementary grades, we are given the opportunity to design programs that help children make a comfortable and successful entry into our schools. Programs for young children can support a smooth transition from home to school by adopting characteristics of the culture-rich home learning environment.

Research on Cultural Differences in School Readiness

Research on the school performance of ethnic minorities in the United States and the Pacific islands indicates that teachers' expectations for successful participation in classroom lessons are often at odds with students' expectations of the roles of teachers, students, and the process of interaction during

instruction. These differences in expectations may not be as pronounced for children from Western middle class families who, for example, have had home experiences of bedtime storybook reading with adults. In this familiar routine, the adult asks questions with known answers, and expands and repeats the child's answers. The routines of the bedtime ritual in these homes closely resembles question and answer routines that elementary teachers use in school lessons. (Flood, 1977; Schiefflin & Cochran-Smith, 1984; Taylor, 1983)

Children who come from other than mainstream American homes often experience difficulty in Western-style classrooms that are organized according to culturally-different assumptions about the use of time, space, language, and instructional strategies. Research in this area in the United States has identified classroom difficulties for Native Americans (Cazden, Carrasco, Maldonado-Guzman & Erickson, 1980; Phillips, 1972), Hispanic Americans (McCollum, 1989), and African Americans (Heath, 1983; Labov, 1970). The gaps in culturally-appropriate adaptations encompass student/teacher interactions in their patterns of communication, language use, and interpersonal relations.

Studies of islanders of Pohnpei (Colleta, 1980), Hawaii (Gallimore, Boggs, & Jordan, 1974; Watson-Gegeo & Boggs, 1977), and Papua New Guinea (Schiefflin & Cochran-Smith, 1984) indicate that the strengths children develop for effective learning in their homes often do not serve them as well in their schools. In a review of the literature on patterns of interaction with

Pacific island children, Jordan, Au, and Joesting (1983) cite numerous studies that identify discontinuity between the home and the school in both language and interaction patterns. They conclude that there are distinct ways that Pacific children communicate, participate, and learn. These can be incorporated into schools through adjustments to classroom organization and teacher/pupil interaction. Such modifications ease the transition to school and enhance student learning.

In addition to the difficulties in transition from home to school experienced by mainstream Western students, Mehan (1979) points to two aspects required for successful school performance that add to the difficulties experienced by ethnic minority students. To achieve success in school, these children not only must know the content of the correct answers but they also must learn how to present their answers in a way that will be acceptable to the teacher. As we view the issue of culturally-appropriate school settings, the content of instruction may be difficult to adapt. The settings or routines for teaching and learning, however, can be designed to make "the ways that answers are presented" less of a problem for Pacific children. For example, learning tasks carried out in small cooperative groups allow students to concentrate on the content of learning rather than the correct ways to answer the teacher.

Modifying School to Match Ways Students Learn

In general, the research shows island students learn to learn

through greater orientation to peers, group performance, and meaningful topics. Classrooms may be reorganized to allow students to work with their peers in heterogeneous groups for both instruction (Au & Kawakami, 1984) and independent work (Jordan, D'Amato, & Joesting, 1981). This modification also addresses the relationships of peers and adults within the classroom setting; with changes in classroom organization come different expectations about students and the role of teachers. In addition to group work, another area for consideration is the teaching and learning interactions that are a part of instructional strategies. Pacing and timing as well as the amount of teacher control can be adjusted to match the preferences of students (Au, 1979; Au & Mason, 1981; Vogt, 1985). Yet another aspect of schools is the content of lessons. The appropriateness or meaningfulness of lessons is critical in students' learning. The work of the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (Au, 1990) has taken these factors into consideration in successfully redesigning a language arts program for Hawaiian students.

Applying the Research to the Pacific

To maintain the value of our many cultures while improving our students' chances for success in the schools of our region, we must first identify the characteristics of the home learning environments. We can then use this knowledge to redesign our educational settings to be sensitive to the principles of

learning that have worked well to maintain our island cultures and knowledge over the centuries. Parents and teachers need to discuss their expectations and collaboratively develop school environments and curriculum to benefit our island students.

The Pacific Region Educational Laboratory (PREL) is currently conducting studies of home and school learning contexts by analyzing data from Kosrae, Saipan, and Yap. We hope to involve families and elementary school teachers in the development of classrooms that can create culturally-appropriate learning environments by attending to the characteristics of learning groups, teachers, topics, and instructional strategies.

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